

Reflections on Coping and Development across the Lifespan

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Coping and development seem inherently inter-connected. No account of coping is complete without acknowledging the central role that age-graded factors play in shaping an individual's adaptation to stress—in what constitutes a stressor, how distress is experienced and expressed, the kinds of personal and social resources that are available for managing stress, the nature of the coping repertoire, and the short- and long-term effects both of stress exposure and of particular modes of adaptation. Likewise, no account of development is complete without a consideration of how individuals respond to stress, and how their attempts to adapt to adversity, master challenge, and deal with failure cumulatively change them for better or for worse.

Despite their apparent connections, coping and development have historically been studied within separate lines of research. Traditionally, coping was viewed as a relatively stable personality characteristic describing individual differences in vulnerability and reactions to major traumatic life events. Traditionally, the goal of developmentalists was to identify normative and systematic changes with age. The study of stable individual differences in reactions to trauma did not seem to have much to offer researchers describing universal age-related changes in normal populations.

However, emerging orientations within the literatures on coping, resilience, lifespan development, and developmental psychopathology offer conceptualisations of coping and of development that are creating common ground. Coping includes flexible and changing reactions to normative challenges, or “everyday stressors”. Development includes differential patterns of individual change. How are these emerging conceptualisations useful to researchers who wonder whether work on coping and development can be mutually informative? We begin by reviewing their assumptions about the nature of coping and the nature of development.

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EMERGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DEVELOPMENT AND COPING

A lifespan orientation has defended a view of differential development as arising from interactions between an agentic developing individual and his/her developing social and material partners, within a set of nested contexts that also have their own changing norms and agendas. Development is the product of active organised engagement in sustained goal-directed effortful interactions with the social and physical environment. At each moment, interactions among social partners in contexts are the outcomes of histories of interactions as well as catalysts for future change.

Within organismic and dynamic systems metatheories of development and developmental psychopathology, adaptation is viewed as a process of continuous reorganisation. The nature of an individual's current organisation (whether biological, psychological, or social) not only shapes present experiences, but is also informative about the past and the future. Current organisation influences the future, in that it creates constraints and potentials for development. Current organisation also reflects the past, in that it is itself the residue of a history of previous interactions. Qualitatively different organisations that are accomplished at successive ages can be thought of as developmental tasks (such as attachment or self-regulation).

Recent conceptualisations of coping view adaptation as part of a process emerging from interactions which tax or challenge an individual's resources. Much work has gone into distinguishing the components that make up this process, including the objective event, subjective appraisal, distress reactions, personal and social resources, coping efforts, and short- and long-term outcomes of coping. Theoretical discussions emphasise the cyclical and cumulative nature of these processes, in which components are sequentially shaped by each other over time, and in which outcomes influence the coping repertoire and resources available for negotiating subsequent stressful transactions.

When described in this way, coping and development seem to converge. Coping provides an outline of microprocesses of change. Coping episodes signal the location of a potentially influential developmental transaction. Development characterises the current level of the individual's organisation, which describes the constraints and potentials for adaptation. Development also provides a framework for examining what is at stake for the organism long term, such as success on a current developmental task, or an adaptation that will make a subsequent developmental task more difficult.

In this essay, we explore some implications of these arguments. Rather than attempt to be comprehensive, we selected four topics we think may be interesting to researchers who study coping and development at any point in

the lifespan. We hope that our arguments provoke further discussion of these issues.

COPING AND DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Many experts critiquing work on coping have suggested that the area would benefit from the construction or influx of theory. At the current time, the field is guided for the most part by frameworks or orientations toward stress and coping that are transactional and process-oriented, but provide little structure for identifying the actual content of stressors, specific resources, particular ways of coping, or potential consequences. The developmental area, being theory-rich, seems a likely area from which to borrow or adapt theories. Which theories could be of service?

Most useful for conceptualising coping, of course, are theories with an explicit focus on how an individual (or social unit) deals with a particular set of demands. For example, attachment theory depicts how the caregiver-infant dyad accomplishes the task of mutual attachment and how this serves to buffer children during stressful experiences of separation or exposure to novelty. These theories provide content to the process components of coping: Attachment theory specifies separation and novelty as stress, internal working model and secure base as personal and social resources, proximity-seeking as coping, exploration as consequence.

In a similar vein, theories of learned helplessness depict how an individual deals with failures and setbacks and how past exposure to noncontingency contributes to the construction of a set of expectations that influence this process. Components of the coping process are given content. According to a learned helplessness perspective, noncontingency and failure are objective stressors, expectations of efficacy and contingency are personal resources, problem-solving versus confusion are ways of coping, and mastery versus helplessness are consequences.

Functionalist approaches to the study of emotion provide another example of the potential generativity of infusing coping research with relevant theory. These approaches focus on the adaptive functions of particular emotions as signals of a state of disequilibrium between the organism and the environment. Particular predictions about the relationships between stress appraisals and coping responses result from specifying the emotional tone of the distress experience. Particular distressful emotions, such as fear or anger, arise from specific types of appraisals, and in turn, elicit specific action tendencies.

These theories can contribute to the study of coping for several reasons. Most obviously, because they focus on how individuals and their social partners face particular demands (such as separation or noncontingency), they specify the *content* of coping. They point out how particular social

contexts and belief systems can shape the experience of stress. They explain why certain specific resources should make a difference to how these demands are dealt with. But, perhaps more importantly, these theories specify the functional significance of coping. In some fundamental sense, coping serves to preserve the organism and its goals—to bring it to safety, to extract an outcome from the physical environment. And in the process, coping creates learning in its broadest sense, about the qualities and actions of the organism, about the trustworthiness of social partners, about the structure of the environment.

Most useful to coping, and by implication to the study of development, will be theories about organisational constructs, like attachment and helplessness, that explain how cognition, emotion, and motivation are organised (or disorganised) under stress, and how these are co-ordinated in the service of action. This analysis also suggests that other dynamic action-oriented theories and concepts may likewise be useful, such as theories of emotion regulation, everyday problem-solving, reactance, self-determination, successful aging, compensation, reactive aggression, and self-efficacy. Similarly, *social* constructs may also be useful in the study of coping and development to the extent that they are dynamic and action-oriented, as suggested by concepts such as negotiation, opposition, coercion, blaming, co-operation, and scaffolding.

THE BORDER BETWEEN CHALLENGE AND THREAT

Adaptive organisms face a fundamental dilemma: How can the organism maintain integrity in the face of constant environmental stimulation, and yet remain flexible enough to respond when it is adaptive to do so? The experience of stress serves an important function in this regard. It signals a mismatch between the individual and the environment; it alerts the individual that something is at stake. Distress energises and directs attention and behaviour toward events of adaptive significance.

When the primary focus of coping research was trauma, it was not surprising to discover that stress is disorganising, that it can overwhelm an individual's personal and social resources. And, when developmental research focused on the universals of development, it was natural to examine experiences of just manageable challenge. However, as coping began to consider everyday stressors, it became evident that stress can have positive effects on action. And, as developmentalists began to consider differential pathways, it became important to include reactions to too few or too many environmental demands.

We argue that researchers studying coping and development are examining processes on (probably qualitatively) different points on the

same continuum. If so, then both have a vested interest in considering the fulcrum or balance between appraisals of threat versus challenge, and between experiences of distress versus enthusiasm. Finding the levers that tip that balance is a task for researchers and interventionists as well as for parents, teachers, mentors, and others who have the successful development of individuals as part of their agenda.

According to a coping perspective, the experience of threat versus challenge is co-constructed by the objective stressor with its demands, and the personal and social resources brought to bear. When the objective demands are not too high, seemingly minor adjustments in either the social context or the person may tip the balance. For example, during a visit to the doctor, a partner's physical presence with no other action, may be enough to convert an elderly person's disorganising distress to alert participation. Or during a painful medical procedure, deep breathing may be enough to maintain calm.

However, when the objective demands are great, both the context and the individual may struggle. The individual may fight for the experience of challenge, for example, by constructive means of coping which reduce objective demands (by prioritising, negotiating, or getting rid of goals or tasks) or increase actual resources (by obtaining information or aid). The context can also reduce demands (by taking over tasks) or increase resources (by offering emotional support). How, under unfavourable conditions, the social unit is able to influence the balance between experiences of challenge versus threat, is a key topic for future research.

Developmentalists also point out that people represent moving targets, in that the specific factors needed to create a balance that favours challenge over threat, will change as individuals develop. On the one hand, as individuals acquire new competencies, these provide new resources for coping. As a result, individuals are able to deal effectively with new demands and also require new opportunities to exercise their developing competencies.

On the other hand, however, the acquisition of new competencies may also provide new avenues for experiencing threat and harm. For example, the emergence of anticipatory skills makes it easier for children to plan but also allows them to worry ahead of time. The ability to imagine multiple outcomes is a help in problem solving, but also allows children to imagine multiple negative outcomes. The development of ways to intentionally regulate emotion allows children to self-comfort—or to self-denigrate. Each new developmental competency presents the opportunity for gains and losses in coping. The study of how individuals and social contexts can adapt to new competencies in ways that allow them to be used for creating experiences of challenge (vs. threat) is important to both coping researchers and developmentalists.

EFFECTS OF COPING ON THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

How an individual reacts to, appraises, and copes with stress affects his or her social partners. A man who blames his wife for his heart attack can alienate his most important source of social support. An elderly person who panics at the prospect of seeing a doctor may delay grown children from taking her to see one. An adolescent who reacts to demands with opposition can provoke more coercion from teachers. Through their emotional distress and behavioural reactions to stress, individuals influence others. A coping perspective suggests that these social reactions can have an impact on any component of the coping process: Social partners can reduce or intensify demands (objective stress), corroborate or question appraisals, help or hinder coping, create or prevent short- and long-term consequences. A developmental perspective suggests that these environmental reactions may not only influence how specific stressful episodes are resolved, but may also cumulatively contribute to development.

For example, a child who reacts with anxiety to novelty may persuade his mother to be overprotective. If she succeeds in shielding him from novelty, his anxiety will be reduced but so will his opportunities to develop new skills for dealing with novelty. Likewise, the father of an anxious child, convinced that the child's fears are groundless, may thrust him into new situations. If the child is chronically overwhelmed, this too will prevent him from learning to deal constructively with novelty. A more sensitive caregiver may be on the lookout for attractive novelty (like new playgrounds) or mildly new situations (like a new teacher in the child's own home), and may introduce the child to these situations slowly, with appropriate warning and preparation, with much support, for short periods of time, with clear escape routes that do not require the child to lose face. If this is accompanied by acceptance of the child's reactions and explicit suggestions about effective strategies, such as graded participation and reminders of other situations in which the novel became the familiar, the child builds a repertoire of proactive and effective coping strategies.

From this description, it becomes clear that the "reactions" of the social context to an individual's ways of coping are as complex a phenomenon as the individual's coping itself. To understand social reactions requires a consideration of the social partner's relationship with and goals for the individual, and the partner's interpretation and own stake in the child's reactions ("No son of mine is going to be a 'fraidy cat'"). It seems relatively straightforward to identify the socially repellent properties of maladaptive coping: Opposition and blame beget defence and coercion, dependency and whining use up others' resources and patience. Others' distress is distressing and individuals are motivated to stop it.

If facilitating development is a goal, however, it is also critical to understand why some parents, teachers, peers, and partners are able to tolerate maladaptive coping and even to convert it to adaptive modes. It is also interesting to explore the social consequences of *adaptive* ways of coping, like problem solving, engagement, or acceptance. What makes these ways of coping socially attractive and hence potentially part of a process that promotes constructive social relationships? To add some structure to this analysis, it may be useful to consider the social contexts' reactions as a form of coping with someone else's coping. It seems likely that caregivers (and others responsible for development) use an individual's changing signals of distress versus engagement as one tool in calibrating the demands made and resources offered in helping them cope with stressful situations. When the copers are children and the reactions are from caregivers, then the cumulative effects on development are evident.

INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE COPING

Changing how people react to and deal with stress has long been a goal of clinical psychologists. Improvements in coping should have positive effects on mental and physical health, and cumulatively, on the course of an individual's development. Despite its documented flexibility and diversity, however, coping has proven relatively resistant to intervention attempts. This makes sense if coping is not primarily a "strategy" but instead represents a mode of adaptation which is embedded in the organisation of an individual's action.

Developmental theories provide some insight into the "iceberg" of which coping can be considered the tip. If proximity-seeking is a way of coping that is based on attachment status, then it is informative to recognise that quality of attachment is based on literally thousands of reciprocal caregiver-infant interactions. If problem-solving is a way of coping that is based on an individual's perceived control, then it is helpful to realise that perceptions of control are the result of perhaps years of interactions in which an individual has been effective in producing desired and preventing undesired outcomes.

These theories also remind interventionists that maladaptive coping is not merely the absence of positive coping, for example, "not asking for help" or "not problem-solving". Just like adaptive coping, maladaptive coping is a systematic product of current organisation, and includes motivated responses, such as avoiding others when stressed, concealing from others when one has a problem, or becoming helpless in the face of difficulties. These maladaptive ways of coping also reflect a history, and are themselves the product of thousands of interactions with the social and material environment.

The view of coping as part of a cyclical process emphasises that these ways of coping played a part in the generation of experiences which confirmed them. Avoiding others is an effective way of never experiencing them as helpful and, if others react with anger when they discover that problems have been concealed from them, it is very easy to become convinced that going to others is genuinely dangerous. Likewise, reacting to difficulty with panic and confusion serves to reduce the actual cognitive resources available for problem-solving and to prevent people from being effective in finding good solutions.

From this perspective, a way of coping arises from a given reality (set of actual interactions) and also acts as a reality-producing set of processes: including ones that lead individuals to seek out or create stressful situations, that filter experience, that shape emotional reactions, that contribute to a set of experiences, and influence their interpretation. The longer these processes have been operating, the greater the history of experiences, and the more they will have been crystallised into belief systems about the nature of the self and the world. At certain points, not only the interactions, but also the belief systems will need to be changed in order to alter ways of coping.

This perspective also reinforces lessons learned from coping interventions, that point out the importance of changing the social contexts of coping. If coping is based on interactions, then the interaction partners are also valid targets of intervention. In the case of children, this means interventions which also target their parents, teachers, and peers. With the elderly, this means interventions which target their children, partners, and friends. With people who have life-threatening diseases, this means interventions that target their families, doctors, and medical staff.

If coping is a force in development, then the goal of an intervention is not merely to change the mean level of a coping strategy. It is to create a stable growth dynamic, that is, to adjust the processes of coping so that they will continue to create interactions which allow coping capacities to grow. This means attending not just to the surface characteristics of ways of coping, such as planning and problem-solving, but also understanding their role in guiding development. Planning is not just a "good" way of coping; it serves the function of allowing the organism to bring its actions in line with its own goals and the actualities of the current context for realising them. Problem-solving is not just a "good" way of coping, it allows for the deployment of effective strategies and the cessation of ineffective ones.

It is possible to imagine that giving individuals the tools of "good" coping is like giving people the power to influence their own development. Good coping should help people to select optimally challenging contexts, to avoid overwhelming situations, and to shape unavoidable environmental demands; to anticipate problems and to create buffers proactively; to appraise optimistically and realistically; to react intentionally, and to cope in

ways that are organised, flexible, and well co-ordinated with social resources and their own personal characteristics, such as their own goals and individual temperament.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we have argued that coping focuses on a process that is shaped by current developmental organisation, but that can also act as a force in creating future development. Coping is a set of cyclical processes that are the product of a history of interactions, but that also contribute to the construction of current experiences. If this is so, then development and coping are profoundly inter-connected. Development shapes the very nature of coping and coping is a core process at the heart of development.

We discussed four implications of this perspective. First, in the coping area, theories are needed that focus on the content and functions of dealing with specific stressors, such as are found in theories of attachment, emotion-regulation, everyday problem-solving, helplessness, and self-determination. In turn, the study of these processes should benefit from the delineation of components, such as stress reactions and appraisals, offered by orientations to coping. Social and material partners, because they are part of these interactions, are critical constituents of coping processes. These new theories should also be informative about mechanisms of development.

Second, constructive coping and development take place at the border between challenge and threat, and it may take both coping researchers and developmentalists to chart that territory. Experiences of balancing between these thresholds, as signalled by expressions of distress and engagement, are used by both individuals and social partners to organise their responses. The emergence of new competencies and corresponding developmental tasks provides an evolving framework for creating new balances. Research on coping may be an important avenue for exploring elusive developmental concepts like optimal challenge, organism-environment match, and zone of proximal development.

Third, an individual's ways of coping have an effect on the reactions of social and material partners. These reactions, in turn, may have a lasting effect on the individual. Hence, important topics of study include how and why social contexts react to individuals' coping, and how these reactions can serve to consolidate or transform the original ways of coping which provoked them.

Fourth, interventions to improve coping will be likely to discover that coping is more than a strategy. It is the product of a cumulative history of interactions and it is embedded in a developmental organisation. As such, changing coping will require changing interactions, which may mean changing the social context and changing an individual's way of viewing the

self and the world. In turn, facilitating “good coping” can be seen as the creation of a stable growth dynamic, which allows an individual to participate more intentionally and effectively in guiding his or her own development.

Manuscript received January 1998

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